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ABSTRACT

To have an impact on students and help them think about the major social issues faced by society today, student personnel professionals must formulate and implement new and significant initiatives. The primary question is whether or not a particular institution will permit discussion of the issues and the creation of a message containing moral and value tones. Although it might be fairly easy for an institution to take a stand on alcohol or drug use, it may be more difficult to reach a position on issues of safe sex and of homosexuality. Peer helpers have been used in the areas of orientation, tutoring, alcohol and drug education, wellness and health education, and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) education. The question is whether these peers will take on the new role of public activists who can challenge other students' behavior and thinking. Colleges could also borrow techniques from the popular mass media. The chief student affairs officer needs to be one of the leaders in the effort; student affairs staff, other campus personnel, and students need to be involved. The University of Maine at Farmington has developed a plan that engages students by emphasizing novel means of communication that will rouse student emotion and sensitivity. The experience at the university has been revealing and instructive. (NB)

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CHALLENGE TO CHALLENGE

[William W. Geller]

She sat at the very edge of the soft chair. As she read her chest began to palpitate, the paper gradually wrinkled where she held it in her hands, her face slowly flushed, her chin lowered to her chest. "I don't want this last sentence and I want to leave out the part about..."

"Certainly...Are you sure it's all right to print this?"

"Yes."

The dining room had the usual buzz when I entered and started to hand out this woman's story along with two others. Silence spread from the tables as I crossed the room. Those on the far side watched with inquisitive eyes. At one table came some silly giggles, at another some men were quietly making light of the story, but at the others, eyes were reading. Many looked up as I passed back through. Their gaze suggested some inner sensitivity was touched.

This woman was willing to share the details (no names) of her rape on campus. Her story appeared in UMF Student Voices a monthly tabloid of stories written by students. The stories are expressions of personal feelings and experiences pertaining to any of the following social issues: AIDS/safer sex, female/male relationships, alcohol/drugs, nutrition/wellness, lesbian/gay/bisexual, community/volunteerism, and multicultural/racism.

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The inner sensitivities of the common ordinary silent majority of the student body need to be reached daily if colleges are to help form a more respectful, open minded, compassionate,

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humanitarian, and socially conscious citizenry that can deal with its social issues. In the 1960's higher education suggested publicly that it could help resolve the nation's social problems. However, in 1989 The Chronical of Higher Education subscribers read about "the new racism", issues of sexism, epidemics of chlamydia, disregard of AIDS victims, presidents calling for tolerance and human decency, orientation programs that focus on diversity, special courses on pluralism, and changes in harassment policies. Most of these are issues that current middle-manager-daily-decision makers faced as students in the 1960's; and yet, they (I am one of them) appear either never to have learned or to have forgotten, for they are doing the hiring, setting salaries, approving the advertising, interpreting policy and the like that perpetuate discrimination, intolerance, and disrespect. In fact, some leaders have claimed that gains made in the areas of racism and women's rights are dissolving. The call for attending to the problem, the lack of resolve of our nation's social issues, has been made by numerous educators.

As educators how can the student personnel profession raise awareness among all students, and help them think about and reflect with others on the major social issues faced by our society? How can we have an impact on student attitudes? To have an impact will necessitate formulating and implementing new and significant initiatives. Two major reasons support this position. First, if the assumption is that in the last 25 years the profession has attended to societal concerns then the profession has had little impact on shaping attitudes pertaining

to social issues (ex. sexism, racism, homophobia); thus, there is little harm in trying something different. Clearly, staff in the student personnel profession are excellent programmers for panel discussions, film series, speakers, topical debates, and such. However, the relatively small proportion of the student body that attends these events do so because of already established commitment or intellectual curiosity or a faculty member who required class to attend. The great silent majority is largely untouched by these programs; they assume it has nothing to do with them.

> "...Listen I'm in my mid 30's; I'm raising two kids; I'm studying to be a teacher. This stuff you're putting out on date rape hasn't anything to do with me..."

Second, the current college programming has less impact on attitudes than the television students watch or the popular magazines they thumb through or the song lyrics they listen to. Two students were overheard saying "...at UMF all we hear about is sex, alcohol, and..." These are two of the very topics they get bombarded with through the previously cited mediums. Colleges have done a lot to regulate on-campus alcohol advertising, but the ads continue elsewhere. Some national organizations argue for no alcohol advertising; others protest the content of television programming. The messages of television and print media continue and are constantly before our eyes and ears with a power that influences attitudes. How do colleges create and present messages with equal impact?

The primary question is whether or not one's institution will permit the discussion of the issues and the creation of a message. If the message is as powerful as the sophisticated ads, then there will be moral and value tones. What value stances will one's institution be willing to take or have implied? In the case of alcohol and drugs the answer may be easily formulated. For safer sex can the staff advocate condom use or will that be interpreted as promoting promiscuous behavior? As regards lesbian-gay-bisexual matters, the ability to reach a position that is more than non-discrimination, tolerance, and affording basic civil rights, if even that, may be impossible.

As one begins to raise social issues questions one of the first responses is: "why are we bothering with this; this isn't a problem here?" Whether or not the matter is a problem on the campus is not the central question. The fact is it is a problem in the communities the students will soon join. Higher education's mission is to create an informed citizenry, more recently labeled, students' ability to live in and appreciate a pluralistic society. However, the question remains as to whether or not the campus community will support open discussion about its issues or an exploration of what they might be. Is the campus willing to discuss the number of chlamydia and other STD cases? Is the campus ready to publicly post: "there was a date rape last evening"...? Can people engage in an exploration and discussion of male students pressuring women students for sex? If the campus will not consider questions of this nature, then the question of whether or not one can work on other's issues

before working on one's own is raised. As suggested by one faculty member these questions cause discomfort;

> "I am just learning about the heated and angry events of recent weeks in response to the issue of a social agenda for the campus, and particularly homophobia...I fully support..."

Despite discomfort a college's leadership will need to initiate or join the debate, raise fundamental questions and take positions that reflect its commonly held values. The act of question raising and position taking, both of which may be protested, helps students examine their attitudes. The tact is in contrast to past practice where institutions might have allowed the debate or discussion of social issues, but usually left the dialogue to students and avoided defining a position. The goal is to engage people's emotions and sensitivities and to provide fuel for thought and dialogue at their living spaces, in the dining room, as they walk from class, in class with faculty, and in campus offices. The desired outcome is one's exploration of one's attitudes in an effort to help the individual appreciate the richness of a pluralistic society.

What are some means for achieving the desired outcome? Strategies will differ by campus, but in the past twenty years students have shown that they are quicker to hear student voices than they are administrative voices. Use of peer helpers has been hailed in such areas as orientation, tutoring, alcohol and drug education, wellness and health education, and AIDS education. Are peers willing and can they move into a new role

as public activists who confront peers by challenging their behavior and thinking? A few will speak out and more will join in when employees of the institution start challenging students and sharing opinions.

A second strategy involves the techniques of the popular mass media. Student attitudes are highly influenced by soap operas, television comedy shows, advertising, and popular magazines, all of which are difficult competition for what might be done on a college campus. Students are bombarded with messages from the different mediums. Can a college develop its own blitz of pictures and 30 to 60 second one and two liners that cause people to begin to look at social issues in other ways? What forms of film projection and printed matter are available for daily use in high traffic walkways? Maybe in addition to the human development specialists, the profession needs advertisers wishing to work on social conscience issues?

Strategy three suggests the chief student affairs officer (CSAO) needs to be one of the leaders in the effort; this person's statements will be interpreted to reflect the position of the institution. The president and CSAO can develop a mutual understanding of the institution's position boundaries which may fluctuate as social issues are raised. The importance of this understanding is reflected in a faculty member's comment, "...but does he have the right to use his position at UMF to foster a social agenda that many faculty and students do not agree with?..."

At times any one segment of the campus may be non-supportive of a

position or of even raising an issue, but the emphasis is to maintain a dialogue. The debate is continued by meeting and talking with critics, and incorporating the suggestions. As in any movement, supporters will rise and can be used to broaden dialogue and raise more issues." [Others] would like to have equal time to present...position..."; they should be accommodated.

The fourth strategy pertains to the involvement of the student affairs staff and other campus personnel. An initial step in mobilizing student personnel staff includes commencing on-going staff development activities that cause staff to consider their own attitudes. Work groups for each social issue selected can then be formed and open to anyone interested. All members of or representatives of these groups can be brought together to generate and review the questions or statements that are being posed to the campus. Since questions and statements are value laden and perhaps interpretable in a variety of ways, some undesirable, reflection of others is necessary. Having such a group also balances the array of messages and provides a spectrum of questions on each topic. The work group also provides a place for any member of the community to drop in to raise a question or to share an experience. "I just had an experience with a discussion [on a social issue] in my class [English] last night that I have to talk about..."

A fifth strategy involves the engagement of the common student. Students understand students' words; therefore, their material should be generated and used. Students can be

encouraged to join the work groups. A news story or campus event offers an opportunity to take up an issue while it is fresh. Constantly confronting students with statements and questions as opposed to only statements suggests thinking. Providing students response outlets, like a public response board or an administrator who can mingle with students in the high traffic area, gives students opportunities to share their thoughts and debate.

The University of Maine at Farmington is working with a plan that engages students, encourages students to look within themselves, and uses advertising, personal stories, current events, and high traffic areas. Traditional programming on the social issues continues, but emphasis is given to novel means of communication that will rouse student emotion and sensitivity. The tactics are simple, few in number, and applied regularly. Tactic one is a daily question, fact or opinion which is projected on a screen in a high traffic area; the message is short enough to be read as one walks by.

> The jury said she deserved to be raped
> by the way she dressed. What do you say?
> (See news article below)

Sometimes readers are asked to express their opinions on an easel and pad set next to the screen or on a ballot form. Tactic two is another set of messages, changed daily and posted on the inside of bathroom stall doors.

"Sexual harassment is not defined by the intentions of the accused,... It is defined by the effect on the victim..."
(Maine Human Rights Commission)

Tactic three is a free standing bulletin board (12 linear feet per side) set in the middle of a high traffic area. Its shape and location change throughout each week. The social issues theme changes weekly. Captions and headings are produced by the media center. Each panel is an ad. Lettering on key quotes or headers is large enough to read in a ten second glance or less. Tactic four is a monthly tabloid (11" x 17") of students' personal experiences about any one of the social issues. It is handed out personally on meal center lines. Tactic five involves a list of questions pertaining to each of the social issues. These questions are being used for some of the writing assignments in first year English classes.

Describe your feelings about homosexuality and what factors have influenced your perceptions of homosexuality over the years.

Tactic six is a working group for each social issue; it is open to absolutely anyone and headed by student personnel professionals. The group has a budget and designs and implements activity pertaining to the social issue.

The experience at UMF has been revealing and instructive. Students do not want to feel like the issues "are being jammed down their throats." The ways they have suggested to eliminate this problem are to make the bulletin boards and overhead

messages interactive, not to dwell on one topic so frequently that it seems like every day, and to provide opportunities to discuss the topics with the CSAO at their gathering points. (Some men feel as though the male species are being picked on unfairly; men and women want a balanced approach. Some messages are very explicit and therefore embarrassing to people (ex. how to put on a condom). Students ask that positive - good news and comic relief messages be used frequently as an escape from the social issues topics. Students like to stand around a public display board and read fellow students' comments on an issue. They also enjoy reading administration responses . Taking a position on a situation and then asking students to respond creates the greatest amount of dialogue. A few worry that some communications are so confrontive that there is a risk of students blocking out the message. Using the suggestions that students, faculty and staff make helps promote the debate. Late in the semester many say "enough is enough." The tactics raise student stress levels and tension among groups. Others are concerned that if they support one thing that that will be interpreted as support for everything. Initiating a dialogue with critics has a calming effect without destroying the debate. The CSAO will take the brunt of the criticism.

What impact does all this have? No one knows, but the comments of the last year and a half suggest some effect. One of the students working on a team said: "...it's not necessarily what we put out or do today or tomorrow or the days after - it may be one of them or a combination of them - it may sink in

today or it may not be until long after they graduate..." A recovering student alcoholic, said - "it was different people with different messages over a long period of time... at some point someone said the right thing that made me want to change..." It is not uncommon to hear students exclaim, "we discussed that in class today." An English 101 professor is taking up some aspect of a social issue at each class. The health center personnel feel students are finding it easier to talk about sex related matters and are asking new questions. Students ask, "what's going up tomorrow?" Others talk about the topics at their gathering points. The CSAO is constantly questioned. Students and faculty are making constructive suggestions for other messages. As students walk through the high traffic area their eyes search for the message. The resident assistants say students are talking about it in the halls. Some faculty say "something positive is happening." A few different groups of students have formed to have their message be a part of the five tactics. There are student complaints about the tactics and there are petitions urging continuation. On the public response boards students are writing opinions and challenging each others comments.

> "Some people have not shown respect on this paper, but I think for the most part people who take the time to share their thoughts also have been respectful. But...have the actions shown respect? At a

> volleyball game, I heard two men put down and make very derogatory remarks about some students from another country. At a class, I listened to one woman tell us how her daughter had been raped... At the gym, at the student center, in the cafeteria, I listened to people say cruel things (including "I wish they were all dead") about homosexuals. I don't care whose toes have been stepped on by these displays and "opinion papers".
>
> People are thinking, talking, and some are taking a good look at some of the views they had in the past and re-evaluating... and making changes. That's what education is all about."

In the 1960's and early 1970's many current administrative leaders were the students who were the activists agitating for dialogue and pursuit of causes. Perhaps in the 1990's there is a need to return to an activists role and incite our campus and our students to attend to the social issues of our time?